The President's House: Freedom and Slavery in the Making of a New Nation

This exhibit is the result of an eight-year collaboration between the National Park Service and the City of Philadelphia. The partnership was advised by an oversight committee that brought local community groups together to help shape the content of this exhibit. Recognition and gratitude are extended to Avenging the Ancestors Coalition, Multicultural Affairs Congress, Philadelphia Convention & Visitors Bureau, African American Museum, Generations Unlimited, Independence Hall Association, and many consulting scholars along with representatives from the offices of Congressmen Robert A. Brady and Chaka Fattah who were instrumental in making this exhibit come to life.

The President's House: 190 High Street

William Birch, High-Street, from Ninth Street, Philadelphia. 1799

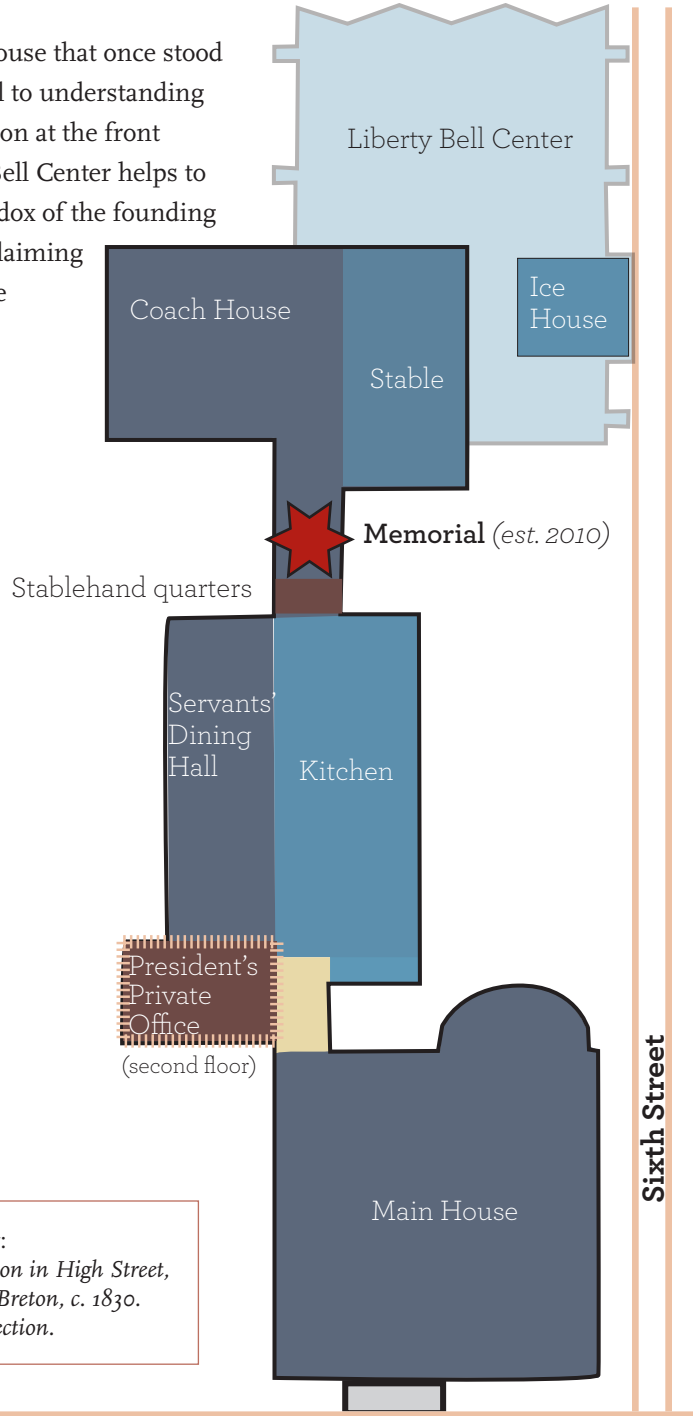
Philadelphia chose Robert Morris' house on High Street as the official presidential residence. Situated on a principal thoroughfare, surrounded by busy shops and a weekly market, the house was both convenient and elegant. Morris purchased the house after a fire in 1780 and then restored it, adding modern touches such as an ice house, two-story bath house, and fashionable Chinese wallpaper in the front parlor. The property included a large walled garden.

The main house served as the public face of America's new leader. The president hosted weekly levees, salons and dinners. Washington added a sizeable two-story bow window off the back of the house. Secretary Tobias Lear reported that this improvement would "make the large dining room and the drawing room over it 34 feet long," adequate for official entertainment.

With more than 20 staff in residence, Washington also built an addition off the kitchen as the servants' dining hall.

After 1800 the house briefly became a hotel, then shops, and finally, in 1832, the new owner gutted the interior to create three different stores. During the 19th century, rapid commercial development left no visual traces of the historic house. In 1951 Pennsylvania demolished all the buildings crowding the square to create Independence Mall State Park. A marker near the walls of the women's restroom reminded visitors of the once significant building on the site.

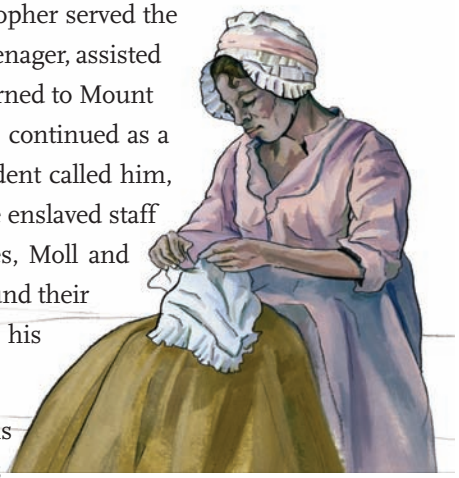
The outline of the house that once stood on this site is central to understanding the exhibit. Its location at the front door of the Liberty Bell Center helps to underscore the paradox of the founding of our nation – proclaiming freedom for all while accepting slavery in its midst.



Caption for the cover:
Residence of Washington in High Street, Phila., by William L. Breton, c. 1830. Courtesy, Private Collection.

The Enslaved

Nine enslaved people from the Mount Vernon plantation were brought to Philadelphia to serve President Washington and his family. Moll and Oney were enslaved maids for the First Lady and her grandchildren. Paris and Giles were stablehands who labored hard to meet the President's high standards for his horses. Austin and Christopher served the president as needed in the house. Richmond, a teenager, assisted in the kitchen and swept chimneys, but was returned to Mount Vernon later the same year. His father, Hercules, continued as a favorite cook. Later "postillion Joe," as the President called him, arrived but didn't stay long. Within two years, the enslaved staff was reduced by four and, by 1795 only Hercules, Moll and Oney remained. Of these, Oney and Hercules found their way to freedom before Washington completed his second term in office.



President Washington knew and trusted his enslaved house staff enough to buy them tickets for the circus and theater and let them venture out into the city's markets on their own. These outings allowed the staff to observe the lives of free blacks living in the city and offered opportunities for communication with Philadelphia's active abolitionist community.

Hercules, known in the family as "Uncle Harkness," may have been the most privileged of the house enslaved. As their grandson recalled, Hercules maintained strict discipline in the kitchen. For state dinners, "it was surprising the order and discipline that was observed in so bustling a scene." Perhaps in appreciation, the President allowed Hercules to sell the leftovers from state banquets. With this income, he improved his wardrobe. He was seen in clothing made of linen "of unexceptionable whiteness and quality" with black silk breeches, waistcoat, and stockings. Donning a blue coat with a velvet collar and bright metal buttons, Hercules was known to enjoy his "evening promenade" with a gold-headed cane in hand.

In 1791 Hercules knew that he was being sent home to avoid gaining his freedom legally through Pennsylvania's Gradual Abolition Act. He expressed his dismay that anyone would "think that a suspicion could be entertained of his fidelity." Martha Washington chose to let him remain past the six-month mark to appease his feelings. Hercules remained in service, hiding what likely was his plan to escape. When his son Richmond was caught stealing at Mount Vernon the summer of 1796, Washington took the precaution to leave Hercules in Virginia. While Washington was enjoying his birthday celebration in Philadelphia the next February, it was reported that Hercules went missing from Mount Vernon. Despite efforts to locate and recapture him, Hercules remained free.

I can only say, that there is not a man living, who wishes more sincerely than I do to see a plan adopted for the abolition of it [slavery]; but there is only one proper and effectual mode by which it can be accomplished, and that is by legislative authority; and this, as far as my suffrage will go, shall never be wanting.

– George Washington
to Robert Morris
April 12, 1786

The Presidential Household

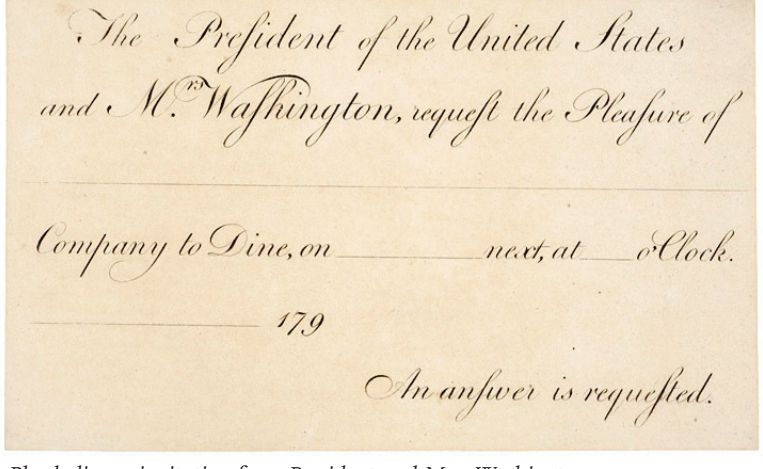
George Washington moved into the President's House in 1790 calling the elegant three-story brick mansion the "best single house in the city." He remained in residence until March 1797. Washington assembled a household of about 30 people, including his wife, Martha, and two grandchildren. They lived on the upper floors of the back wing over the kitchen along with two enslaved maids. Washington converted the second floor of the bath house into his private office. The President's secretaries manned the official executive office on the third floor, where they lived and worked.

Mrs. Emerson, a well-born widow, served as housekeeper. A steward managed the formal entertaining and family dining. A coachman supervised the care of horses and various wheeled vehicles, when not driving the family to social or business engagements. Cooks, washerwomen, and porters all found their work time consuming, and not very well paid. Some of the house servants lived in the attic, with the enslaved "Black servants" and white domestics living in separate rooms.

Washington limited the number of enslaved servants he brought from his home in Virginia. He was conscious that Pennsylvania's Gradual Abolition Act and a proactive local abolitionist society might spell trouble. Instead, he acquired up to eight indentured servants, young German or Dutch immigrants who worked for no wages in order to repay their transportation and living costs upon coming to America. They served as stablehands, kitchen helpers, washers and maids.

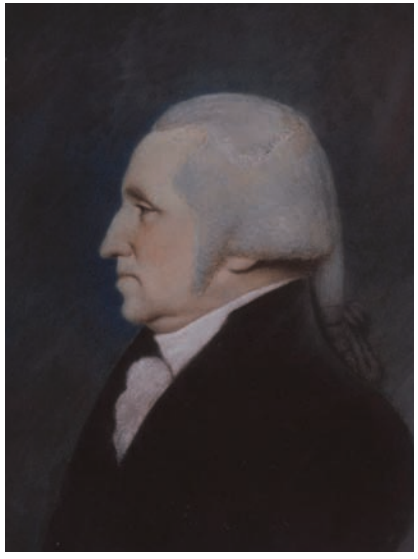
President John Adams and First Lady Abigail lived in the house from 1797 to 1800. They were joined by their niece who helped manage affairs. They relied on their long-time faithful servant Briesler and his wife to run the household, with one secretary on salary, and chose to hire workers from Boston and Philadelphia to cook and clean.

Adams was a frugal man with restrained tastes. He and his wife never owned any slaves. In contrast to the pomp and splendor of the previous administration, the President's House during the Adams presidency was a more sedate place. Adams ran a simple household and frequently underspent the funds allotted for state functions and entertaining.



Blank dinner invitation from President and Mrs. Washington, c. 1790-1797.
Courtesy, The Mount Vernon Ladies Association.

The Presidents



George Washington (1790-1797)
by Ellen Sharples (1796-1810)

Washington served two terms as our nation's first President. In 1790, after Congress passed the Residency Act, the federal government moved from New York City to its new temporary home in Philadelphia. In his new presidential mansion Washington picked a sunny room on the second floor in the back bath house for his personal office and a third floor room in the main house for his executive headquarters.

During his time as chief executive, the first ten amendments to the Constitution (known as the Bill of Rights) were passed. He also approved a national banking system to keep the country financially stable and proclaimed a policy of neutrality in European affairs. He appointed cabinet officers, negotiated peace treaties with Native American tribes, lobbied for an army, and closely supervised the construction of the new capital, named in his honor, Washington, D.C.

The issue of slavery plagued Washington during his years in office. By the time he arrived in Philadelphia, he had privately begun to express doubts about the institution, but also expressed frustration with those who worked openly against slavery. Despite his misgivings, while living in the President's House, he signed into law the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793. This notorious law mandated the return of enslaved persons to their owners and made it a crime to aid in the escape of the enslaved.

John Adams (1797-1800)
by Charles Willson Peale (1791-1794)

John Adams succeeded Washington as president in the first peaceful transfer of power under the new Constitution. He perpetuated the precedents set by Washington for the chief executive by holding levees, keeping counsel with his cabinet and giving an annual State of the Union Address.

During his presidency, Adams led a deeply divided and increasingly partisan country. Tension and conflict grew as the new Republican Party openly challenged the Federalists, the established party to which Adams was allied. Adams wrestled with the "XYZ Affair," a diplomatic crisis that nearly plunged America into war with France. The Adams administration saw the ratification of the 11th Amendment to the Constitution, the creation of a national navy, and the establishment of the Mississippi Territory. Adams also endured criticism by signing the Alien and Sedition Acts that trespassed on citizens' rights, particularly free speech.

The Executive Branch

The office of President of the United States was identified by the Constitution in 1787, with General George Washington in mind. The delegates gave power to the Executive knowing that the former Commander-in-Chief would inspire public pride during the early years of adjustment under a strong federal government as created by the Constitution.

Washington unanimously won the presidential election in 1788 and took office in New York City in March 1789. The enormity of his responsibility weighed on him as he began to create the new government.

He organized his official life to accommodate the crush of civilian and governmental requests for a personal audience. Washington hosted unstructured social gatherings known as "levees" every Tuesday. These events lasted about an hour and gave federal and state officers an opportunity to shake hands and perhaps converse with the president. Washington also hosted a series of formal state dinners, largely for politicians and visiting diplomats. On Fridays he set aside time for informal entertaining to greet guests who enjoyed a leisurely evening with both the President and First Lady.

Washington created the first Cabinet, comprised of the heads of the principal federal departments, to advise him on government matters. Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of the Treasury, gained considerable influence with Washington, much to the disapproval of his Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson. Political parties developed and became fiercely oppositional during Washington's presidency.

At the core of party politics lay the tensions between Great Britain and France, who were engaged in an unpopular war during the mid-1790s. The Federalists, led by Alexander Hamilton, favored support for Great Britain, while the Democratic-Republicans aligned themselves with France. John Adams observed years later that the tensions in Philadelphia over President Washington's 1793 Neutrality Proclamation to keep the United States out of the war in Europe, nearly ended the republic:

> Terrorism, excited by Genet . . . when ten thousand People in the Streets of Philadelphia . . . threatened to drag Washington out of his House, and effect a Revolution in the Government, or compel it to declare War in favour of the French Revolution and against England.

Philadelphia newspapers flourished and took sides in the debate. Some did not spare the President, especially the *Aurora* printed by Benjamin Franklin's grandson. Washington managed to stonewall the inflammatory editors, whereas Adams, upon signing the Alien and Sedition Acts, tackled them head on using the new law to throw public critics in jail.

Adams followed many of the precedents set by Washington for the office of the President. "The great Washington," as one visitor called him, set the tone and formality of the office, its boundaries with Congress, and began the ritual of the annual "state of the union" message. The Executive Branch took its place with the legislative and judicial arms of government as a force to be considered, but always within the framework of the whole.

Philadelphia: The Nation's Capital 1790-1800

The federal government found accommodations in Philadelphia on today's Independence Square. The U.S. Congress occupied the refurbished county courthouse on the right, at Sixth Street. The U.S. Supreme Court sat in the Mayor's courtroom in City Hall to the left, at Fifth Street.

Pennsylvania legislators lobbied hard in Congress to bring the national capital back to Philadelphia. The debate was prolonged, but in July 1790 Congress passed the Residency Act that called for the construction of a new federal city along the Potomac River in Maryland. During the ten years set aside for construction, Philadelphia was designated as the temporary capital.

Philadelphia, already the largest, most cosmopolitan city in the nation, grew by leaps and bounds, drawing talent from New York eager to profit from the federal center. Revolutions in France and the French colony of San Domingo (today's Haiti) also attracted scores of French refugees, who set up dance, music, art studios and bookstores to instruct and amuse city residents. French styles and language became the fashion.

Known for its religious toleration, Philadelphia offered churches of multiple Christian denominations and at least one synagogue. With the impetus from the Free African Society, the first African Methodist Episcopal and African Episcopal churches opened their doors in 1794. These churches provided leadership and fellowship for the rising free black community.

Philadelphia became the center for the abolitionist movement to end slavery. With the passage of the Gradual Abolition Act in 1780, the Pennsylvania Abolition Society's legal advocacy for free and enslaved alike showcased the conflicted public opinion on slavery in America's society.

The devastating yellow fever epidemic of 1793 shattered any hopes of keeping Philadelphia as the nation's capital. Recurring outbreaks gave the city a reputation for unhealthy conditions and, in May 1800, the federal government moved to the District of Columbia.